

Jeremiah 18:1-11
September 5, 2010

South Plains

Blessing Backpacks, Etc

The world of work fascinates me. Whether it's visiting an elementary school principal in her office or looking over Kirk Hall construction plans with Mo Kuper in the trailer, the multifarious skills given by God testify to the wisdom of creation. Of course, wisdom is not the only quality one sees in work. In another church I spent a wonderful hour with a stockbroker as he went over the evidence that signaled a good investment to him. A couple of year later he was in the news, convicted of defrauding his clients. Whether work brings joy or sorrow, it's important because it requires so much our lives, it refines so much our character, and it rewards so much of our living. It's appropriate to celebrate Labor Day.

Scripture begins with God's work of creation. It doesn't seem like work at first blush since the first six days are accomplished by God simply speaking words which shape the chaos into the world with all its components. Only at the end of creation, we learn that it has been work. "On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done (Genesis 2:2)." We work and we rest in imitation of God.

When we fail to maintain a rhythm somewhat like the rhythm of creation that works and then rests, we don't function very well. Kids work at school and then go to recess, or they should in my humble opinion. Rescuers in Chile have consulted with NASA and others about how to keep those trapped miners alive for three months when they are half a mile underground. One of the recommendations tells the miners to maintain the rhythm of day and night, work and rest. Our bodies have been made for exertion followed by relaxation.

Time and again, the pages of scripture use work to open the mind of God to us. Jeremiah 18 is only one example. The prophet Jeremiah is directed to visit the potter's house. There he sees the potter working with soft clay, shaping a pot, a cup, a bowl, a vessel for someone else to work with. But, there's a problem. The clay is not cooperating. Maybe it's too wet or too dry or has a lump. At any rate it's spoiled. The potter starts again, pressing the same clay into a shapeless mass at the center of the wheel, and then shaping it into the vessel he or she always had in mind.

God says, "I'm like that potter. Israel is like the clay in my hands. I shape the nation as I say I want it. If the nation will not shape up, I start again, like the potter. Look, Israel, I'm about to mash you into the shapeless lump you were in Egypt. "Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings (18:11)." It is the work that we do together as teachers, judges, parents, politicians, school kids, retirees, preachers and

ditch diggers – our work shapes us into the society God has in mind. Or, else, it shapes us into something God doesn't like.

The old gospel hymn says, "Mold me and make me after thy will, while I am waiting, yielded and still." It's a nice thought, but I believe most of the molding and making happens not only at church, but especially at work. It happens through the people we associate with during the day, the jobs that consume our best time and best skills, the way we communicate, the gifts we develop and the money we make that in turn makes us. God is shaping our neighborhood and our nation.

Two things about this passage are inescapable: First, there are consequences for failure. Individuals fail to respond positively to what God is doing. Whole nations fail. The people of Israel failed to become the chosen people God intended so God used the Assyrians and Babylonians to break down Israel in order to build it back up after the exile. The consequences were severe.

The second and most wonderful thing about this parable is that it tells us God can change his mind. Just as the potter can change the plan from making a graceful vase into making a chamber pot, or from an inkwell into a beautiful plate, God can and will change the plans God has for us. We can change.

The tax cheat can become a patriotic citizen. The disruptive school kid can pay attention in class. The

sloppy accountant can follow acceptable practices. The abusive boss can become courteous.

And, a whole people can change. Dysfunctional churches start acting like Christians. Neighborhoods become welcoming. It doesn't happen overnight, and the larger the group, the longer and more painful change will be. Labor Day reminds me that one of the places significant change takes root and grows is in the workplace.

Let me tell you a Christmas story. In 1965 the cartoonist Charles Schultz was commissioned create a TV special. He wrote the story the way he had experienced Christmas filled with religious meaning. The TV executives hated it, especially where Linus quotes straight from the second chapter of Luke in the King James Bible. The producers feared a disaster. Charles Schultz turned to them and said, "If not us, then who's going to do it?" They produced it the way he wanted it.

On December 9, 1965 "A Charlie Brown Christmas" was seen in 15 million homes to critical acclaim, winning an Emmy and a Peabody award. It's still shown at the holiday. Schultz used his gifts, his job to bring the delight of Luke's Christmas story alive again. His achievement was not in quoting scripture on TV, but in telling a poignant story about a Christmas tree that needed a home, a story that echoed a holy family without a place to spend the night.

We don't have to be famous and rich to do our jobs well. We don't even have to quote the Bible. In fact most of us will reflect the craft and wisdom of our Creator, not in words, but in the way we act at school, the care we invest in our daily tasks, the attitude we take to the office, and the ethic we practice in business. Labor Day is a celebration of the way we imitate God.